

Another Look at Imoral Art

Let us begin by proposing a typology of the kinds of immoralism usually associated with works of art. First, there is the case of artworks that contain and support morally dubious content that was clearly intended by their author. Secondly, we may have ethically ambiguous artworks whose author does not clearly distinguish herself from malicious characters, situations or actions. And thirdly, there are artworks that present stylistic turns that are considered morally wrong.

The first type of immoral art is often exemplified by Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*, and its infamous glorification of fascism, Ezra Pound's *Cantos* with its blatant anti-Semitism. The passionate description of sexual violence and misogyny in Sade's *Justine* or the celebration of the Ku Klux Klan in David W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, are also among the most recurrent examples of works of art tainted by an assumed moral stance that is generally considered to be wrong.

A second group is constituted by works in which it is difficult, if not altogether impossible, to find a clear position of their authors *vis-à-vis* the kind of message that is being conveyed. Let us consider, for instance, the final sequence of Neil Jordan's *The Strange in Me* (2007), when Jodie Foster's character executes in cold blood the members of the gang that killed her husband, thus replacing the role of an official justice that had been discredited by the policeman portrayed by Terrence Howard.

A third group holds artworks that present formal options that are considered to be moral blemishes. In 1959, Gillo Pontecorvo directed *Kappo*, a film about the survival strategies of the Jewish teenager Edith, a prisoner in a German concentration camp. One scene of this movie would become particularly famous: one of the camp's prisoners commits suicide by throwing herself against the electrified barbed wire. Pontecorvo

decided then to do a travelling towards the prisoner's dead body. This option would receive this comment by Jacques Rivette: "The man who decides, on a moment like this, to frame the corpse in a *contre-plongée*, making sure that the risen hand is in a specific angle of the final framing (...) [this] man deserves nothing but the deepest contempt"¹. Rivette was using Jean-Luc Godard's famous idea according to which "all travellings are a moral issue", thus condemning the obscenity of the "aestheticization of horror".

All these cases share an important question: does an ethical flaw necessarily constitute an aesthetic flaw? Many philosophers tend to think that by removing the moral defects of an artwork one would also be able to improve it in artistic terms. Because it is hard to imagine how this ethical cleansing would produce aesthetic improvements, other philosophers prefer to keep moral and artistic issues separated. But because it is also hard to imagine how these issues can be kept apart in the case of way too many artworks, some other philosophers prefer to consider the author's moral intention, however dubious or immoral it may be, as an important condition for the aesthetic understanding of the work. These are the three most common ways of considering the relation between the moral and the artistic qualities of a work of art: autonomism, ethicism and immoralism. This paper proposes a survey of the three philosophical theories and assumes a position in favour of the latter.

1. Autonomism

It is fair to think that autonomism is based upon five main arguments: disinterestedness, the common denominator argument, art *versus* "responsive life", the

¹ Rivette, Jacques, "De l'abjection", in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 120, June 1961.

fact that we are very ignorant of the connections between art and morality, and the moral triviality of many artworks. Let us take a closer look at them.

The historic origin of autonomism or formalism in art is linked to the concept of “disinterestedness”.² This is a recurrent term and probably the most pervasive category in modern and contemporary Aesthetics, from Kant to Schopenhauer, from Bergson to Croce, from Bullough to Stolnitz. The concept played an important role in making it possible for the artistic activity to be considered as a specific phenomenon, a proper object waiting for a method of analysis. Basically speaking, the category of disinterestedness makes it possible to believe that there is a unique kind of attention that we devote to the perception of a kind of objects that are so *autonomous* and *self-sufficient* that can only be fully understood if they are disengaged from real life. It is interesting to consider the fact that Anglo-American and French historians dispute the philosophical origin of the term. Even more interesting is the fact that both explanations establish a deep connection between disinterestedness (and therefore autonomism) and some important theological / ethical choices. I.e., if we consider its historical inception, we tend to think that autonomism is a kind of moralism. Writing against an article by Jerome Stolnitz on the origins of aesthetic disinterestedness³, Rémy Saisselin⁴ argued that the concept emerged out of the dispute between Jesuits and Jansenists concerning the issue of whether “Can men love God disinterestedly?” meaning “can men love God for its own sake, and not because of their selfish purposes?” The question would be

² Cf. Allentuck, Marcia, “A note on Eighteenth-Century ‘Disinterestedness’”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 1, n.1, Fall 1962, 89-90; Schiller, Jerome, “An alternative to ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness’”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 22, n°3, Fall 1963, 295-302

³ Stolnitz, Jerome, “On the origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness’”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 20, n°2, Winter 1961, 131-143; Stolnitz, Jerome, “A third note on Eighteenth-Century ‘Disinterestedness’”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 22, n.1, Fall 1963, 69-70.

⁴ Saisselin, Rémy, “A second note on Eighteenth-Century ‘Disinterestedness’”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 21, n°2, Winter 1962, 209-210

picked up by Leibniz. In a letter to his Scottish friend Burnet, he would propose a particular kind of love under the formula of “*amare est felicitate alterius delectari*”, “*trouver son plaisir dans la félicité d’autrui*”: “all the things that we desire for their own sake (...) give us pleasure because of their excellent qualities in such a way that the happiness of the loved object enters our own happiness”.

Anglo-American historians insist that the category of disinterestedness was developed in England and originated in the work of Eighteenth Century philosophers reacting against Thomas Hobbes’ moral egotism and religious instrumentalism. Disinterestedness became an important argument against the idea that moral agents are solely motivated by a desire for personal gain. Lord Shaftesbury’s arguments in this respect are particularly interesting because he is arguably the first author to establish a connection between the disinterested virtuous man and the art spectator. Interestingly, in Shaftesbury’s view disinterestedness is not the same thing as benevolence. It is a suspension of the surrounding circumstances and an exercise of personal abstraction.

Disinterestedness theories lead to aesthetic formalism which is based upon the argument of the common denominator: any classificatory criterion that we wish to apply to distinguish between art and non-art should be universally applicable to all artworks. Formalists would then argue that only the exhibition of form could be taken as the common element to all artworks. This implies that, since not every work of art holds a moral dimension, it would be misleading to use it as a distinct artistic characteristic.

Another important argument would be held by the Shaftesbury critics, Roger Fry and Clive Bell. In order to distinguish art from non-art, Fry used his famous distinction between “responsive” and “imaginative” life. Art liberates us from the network of causes and consequences that characterizes everyday life, including the moral consequences of our deeds. Thus, any attempt to assess art in terms of its moral

consequences would jeopardize the criterion by which the very classification of what is artistic and what is not is possible.

Contemporary formalists have also insisted upon the fact that we know very little about the behavioural consequences of consuming art and that we know close to nothing about how to measure the moral consequences of art. It is often noticed that there is no linear causal connection between artistic culture and moral integrity.

Also, formalists don't expect art to provide us with any kind of moral or civil education. And even if art could transmit a moral ethos in a propositional mode, its teachings would be ridiculously trivial. If we compare Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* to Schiller's poem it seems clear that the quality of Beethoven's music transcends Schiller's simple appeal to universal fraternity. On the other hand, many lesser art objects are considered to be important from a moral point of view. But their moral value does not preclude them from being mediocre art, at best. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was and still is an invaluable educational tool but its moral virtues are not enough to turn Harriet Beecher Stowe into a great writer.

Many objections have been traditionally raised against autonomism. How does all this apply to art which is morally or politically engaged, such as religious art, political art or intervention art? In these cases, political or moral sterilization implies aesthetic amputation. Also, and particularly in the case of fiction, many artworks depend on the audience's ability to employ a number of common reasoning (including moral assessments) when they read a novel or watch a movie. The fact that the spectator is prone to feel some kind of empathy towards a character who has been wrongly mistreated or some kind of aversion towards the villain who corrupts a given set of established values is important in order to create diegetic traction.

2. Ethicism

In a direct opposition to aesthetic “disinterestedness”, there is the perspective of those who argue in favour of a deep connection between art and moral ethos. Aesthetic ethicism has many faces but it can be divided into three main groups: the different kinds of Platonism, Humean ethicism and contemporary moderate moralism.

2.1. Platonism

Plato’s mistrust of art, albeit a certain kind of *art*, is present in many other authors, such as Rousseau, Tolstoy or George Bernard Shaw. In Plato, and specifically in *The Republic*, the case against mimetic art is supported by two main arguments: the Moral Argument and the Ontological Argument.

The Moral Argument is developed in Books II and III: mimetic art is wrong because it seldom imitates what is good and virtuous. This suspicion starts off not with an examination of the nature of the art object in itself or with a proper survey of the effects such kind of objects has upon its audience, but rather with a disapproval of the kind of person that produces art. Human evolution implies social division of labour (370b) and it is highly convenient that each man should stick to the practice of only one craft. But artists are quite the opposite of this tendency towards specialization. Being an imitator, the artist pretends to know every trade and industry of those he imitates or whose works he imitates, from the warrior to the merchant and from the warrior to the politician. But since it is “impossible for a single person to practice many crafts or

professions well” (374)⁵, then there is something pretentious and fake involved in the personality of every artist.

This “professional liar” practices the “lie without nobility” which is to be found in the works of Hesiod or Homer. This consists in describing “what the gods and heroes are like” (377e) out of a complete ignorance of what is being portrayed. The gods are selfish, petty and violent beings, and metamorphosis seems to be a trait of their very essence. It is quite normal that so happens because it is through peripety and change that the writer grabs his audience. However, what is really divine and good does not change and therefore the real god has only one shape and does not lie, beg, or is sorry about his deeds, nor does he ever laugh, because (388e). It is obvious then that, since the life of the true god or of the virtuous man is so plainly *dull*, it does not constitute an easy or attractive artistic subject: “[T]his excitable character admits of many multicolored imitations. But a rational and quiet character, which always remain pretty well the same, is neither easy to imitate nor easy to understand when imitated” (604e). That explains why the artistic imitative talent is dedicated to the wrong models because these shall always have an eager audience. Plato goes as far as analyzing the style of imitation and discovers a particular danger in the way poets tend to use direct speech when “the poet himself is speaking and doesn’t attempt to get us to think that the speaker is someone other than himself” (393). The imitator should be ashamed of imitating a “character unworthy of himself” (396d). Therefore the poet should not use direct speech when he represents vicious and despicable characters (395b), slaves and wicked and perverse men, madmen or wrongdoers (396a), or even the whining and lamentations of women (396d). Because it is difficult to follow this rule in the case of tragedy or comedy, Plato

⁵ Plato, *Complete Works*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997, p.1013

excludes them from his Republic: “for our own good, we ourselves should employ a more austere and less pleasure-giving poet and storyteller” (398b).

The Ontological Argument is presented in Book X. In the earlier Books, and in spite of all the reservations, art is still admissible. Not so in Book X. If all apparent “reality” is already an imitation of ideal archetypes and if virtuous life should lead us towards that ideal reality, following an intellectual and not a sensual pathway, why should we submit ourselves to art objects that are nothing but imitation of imitations, “third from the natural one” (597e)? A master of deceit, the “imitator has neither knowledge nor right opinion about whether the things he makes are good or bad” (602a) and should therefore be banned of any well ordained city.

2.2. Humean Ethicism

Humean ethicism believes that all moral flaws of an artwork are also aesthetic defects. This fundamental thesis is present in this passage by David Hume:

“But where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners in his age, I never can relish the composition.”⁶

Whereas platonic moralists argue that a morally flawed artwork is nevertheless accessible and enjoyable by its audience, Humean ethicists defend that any immoral default shall prevent a proper appreciation of the work.

Shakespeare, Racine and Corneille were all accused of not respecting the Aristotelian principle of poetic justice, i.e., the principle according to which virtue should always vanquish and vice should always be defeated. Corneille would even go as

⁶ Hume, David, (1757), “Of the Standard of Taste”, in *David Hume - Selected Essays*, (Copley, E. e Edgar, A. (eds.)), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp.133-154.

far as to argue that the mark of a really grand dramatic work was to make us continue to love virtue even when not properly rewarded and abhor vice even if it would remain unpunished. Thus, and contrary to Hume, a vicious manner could be in fact be presented “without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation”. And the work’s content, however offensive it may be, would not make the whole work offensive.⁷ The fact that I “should not” share the sentiments of parts of an artwork does not mean I “cannot” do it. Thus, and *pace* Hume, it seems it is always possible to separate *description* and *prescription* in any given artwork.

2.3. Moderate moralism

Contrary to more conservative or more radically moralist authors such as Frank Palmer or Roger Scruton, moderate moralism is more interested in investigating the role that morality plays in our aesthetic transaction with a significant number of important artworks. This is a more reasonable position because radical moralism assumes that the reader or the viewer is always involved in imagining herself in the role of the character and therefore that this empathy always leads to behavioural consequences. However this kind of empathy has been frequently defied and it is not clear that this is the norm in the fruition of narrative fictions. This kind of moralism is usually based upon three main arguments: the best-fit argument, the cognitivist argument and the argument of merited-response.

The best-fit argument sustains that to believe that immoral artworks are wrong (also, aesthetically speaking) runs in favour of what the majority of art consumers believe. This fact is also acknowledged by many artists who, against the autonomist’s

⁷ Booth, Wayne (1988), *The company we keep: An ethics of fiction*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, p.397.

beliefs, tend to produce art that is deeply committed to moral, political and religious purposes. To ignore their intended moral connections – as suggested by the autonomist – would make these objects aesthetically incomprehensible. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that art is significantly linked to a moral ethos and artworks that disrespect this ethos tend to be misperceived by the audience.

The cognitivist argument defends the idea that morality is often engaged by artists and serves an aesthetic function. In the case of fiction, it is important in order to create diegetic traction. It is also used to fill in narrative ellipses and the author believes that a shared morality will be sufficient to explain several intentional “Leerstelle”, as Roman Ingarden would call them: the psychology of certain characters, certain sociological features of the fictional world but also the emotions that are required in order to understand the piece: e.g., to understand Medea, one has to activate a certain horror towards what is going on. It is not art that is serving life but art employing life and arguably all narratives involving human issues tend to use the usual moral standards of its audience in order to achieve some important efficiency gains. By doing so, argues the moderate moralist, it is thereby exposed to moral assessment: if moral standards are wrongly used or used in a twisted way that can be seen as constituting an aesthetic flaw. Since this kind of narrative provide us with unique opportunities to exercise our powers of moral recognition and judgment, it is only natural that we refer to them in ethical terms. Thus, and pace the autonomist, much art contributes to our moral learning.

This also means that fictional narratives constitute unique opportunities for exercising our powers of moral recognition and judgment because the process of understanding the narrative becomes itself a moral exercise. Since these narratives awake and stir our moral powers it is only natural that we should discuss them in ethical terms. An important group of artworks are morally educative because they become an

opportunity for self-understanding. This is the case when the fictional situation encourages the audience to produce a new linkage between moral beliefs that were previously dispersed (e.g., Haruki Murakami's short story "The year of the Spaghetti"). This is what Noël Carroll calls a *transactional* or *clarificationist* perspective of the relation between art and morality⁸: some art contributes to our moral understanding, i.e., it strengthens our ability to recognize and assess unexpected connections between our moral beliefs.

The moral particularism of philosophers such as Iris Murdoch or Martha Nussbaum⁹ believes that a lot of the principles of our moral heritage are so abstract that we need to tie them down to real situations in order to achieve a proper perspective of them. Art, and particularly fictional narrative, works as the exemplum of medieval moral education:

- Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* exemplifies the Rousseauian-like romantic principle that evil comes not from nature but from social conditioning.

- Henry James' *The Golden Bowl* shows an intriguing variation of the connection between love and sacrifice.

- Tchekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* builds the remarkable contrast between Lopukhin's prudent life and the inconsequent and finally desperate bright of Madame Ranevskaya's mundane existence.

The important point here is that since art plays a significant role in moral upbringing, narrative fictions that employ and develop our moral understanding become, *ipso facto*, more absorbing and aesthetically appealing. On the other hand, artworks that pervert or confound our moral understanding, by tying, for instance, some

⁸ Carroll, Noël (1998), "Art, narrative and moral understanding", in *Aesthetics and Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998

⁹ Cf. Nussbaum, Martha (1990), "'Finely aware and richly responsible': literature and moral imagination", in *Love's Knowledge*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990

moral principles to dubious characters, oppose this clarificationist model and should also be disqualified. Noël Carroll exemplifies this moral muddling with the connection suggested between homosexuality and monstrosity in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

Berys Gaut's moderate moralism¹⁰ is based upon his "Merited Response" argument, which derives from the Humean thesis according to which it is impossible for us to adopt sentiments that we consider to be immoral. The argument is as follows:

1. Immoral art expresses a wrong ethical perspective because it calls for the imagining of pernicious attitudes and feelings.
2. Non-ethical responses are never merited.
3. Non-merited responses constitute artistic flaws.
4. Thus, immoral art is aesthetically flawed because we have a serious motive for not responding in the form prescribed by the author, and such as a horror movie that makes us laugh or a comedy that bore us to sleep, artworks that convey a moral direction that is not followed by their audience are artistic failures.

A similar argument could be found in Elizabeth Anderson's defense of comic moralism. Imagine someone tells you a racist joke: "A gypsy and a coloured guy are in a car. Who is driving? Answer: The policeman."

"Someone may laugh at a racist joke but become embarrassed by her laughter. Her embarrassment reflects the judgment that the fact of finding the joke amusing does not constitute a proper response to the joke. The joke was not genuinely good or amusing, it does not deserve laughter."¹¹

¹⁰ Gaut, Berys (1998), "The ethical criticism of art", in *Aesthetics and Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; Gaut, Berys, "Art and ethics", in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, (B. Gaut e D. Lopes (eds.)), London: Routledge, 2001.

¹¹ Anderson, Elizabeth (1993), *Value in Ethics and Economics*, Cambridge (Ma.): Harvard University Press, 1993, p.2.

According to Anderson or Gaut, it is the set of moral considerations that shows us if a given emotion constitutes or not a proper response to a joke or a work of art. The emotions we consider to be not proper do not lead us to emotions such as laughter or nostalgia, i.e., the kind of emotions we look for in art. But this seems bizarre. It is true that our responses do not always reflect our critical judgments. But it seems odd to think that because the joke is incorrect it is therefore not funny. If the joke is genuinely funny it seems counterintuitive to think that embarrassment, shame or guilt will be the immediate proper response to it. Laughter will. The embarrassment is chronologically secondary and what is offensive in a joke can be precisely what is hilarious in it. Thus, to moralize the joke is to kill it.

3. Immoralism

What if the moral turbulence manifested by an artwork is instrumental to its aesthetic experience? This is the kind of question that intrigues both autonomists and ethicists. But they make entire sense for the supporters of aesthetic immoralism which could be divided into two major trends: functional immoralism and anti-moralism.

3.1. Functional immoralism

Lawrence Hyman argued that the subversive or transgressive character of much art is intrinsically valuable.¹² The tension between our aesthetic reaction and our ethical response can clarify our moral standards and act as a catalyst of aesthetic experience. Now, both responses (moral repulse and aesthetic fascination) must be simultaneous

¹² Hyman, Lawrence (1984), "Morality and Literature – The necessary conflict", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 24, n°2, Spring 1984, 149-155

because the specific type of moral disgust one feels when we are having an aesthetic experience is only comprehensible because there is already an aesthetic experience to start with. Even Plato admitted the special kind of charm that the “artistic lies” had upon him.

Functional immoralism lies in symmetric contrast to the cognitivist section of moderate moralism. The latter underlines the important functional role of moral engagement when it comes to create diegetic traction. The former stresses the dramatic effect of moral disgust. Take the case of King Lear and his cruel mockery of Gloucester’s blindness when the Earl asks the King if he knows him:

“I remember thine eyes well enough. Dost thou squiny at me? No, do thy worst, blind cupid, I’ll not love.”

3.2. Anti-moralism

Anti-moralists believe that to judge that it is wrong to feel a certain emotion, or that it is wrong to have fun or become amused with something that transmits such an emotion, is logically distinct from the judgment that the response intended by the author is not merited (i.e., that the joke isn’t funny or that the artwork is aesthetically flawed). This thesis is supported by five main claims.

The first claim holds that some art is purportedly “incorrigible”¹³ and requires the tension between our aesthetic reaction and our moral response. If there really exists such a thing as “morally incorrigible” art (by this meaning artworks whose aesthetic value cannot be detached from its aesthetic value) then both the autonomist and the ethicist are wrong. Some significant examples could be presented: Sade’s *Justine*, Leni

¹³ Jacobson, Daniel, “In praise of immoral art”, *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 25, n°1, Spring, 1997, 155-199

Riefenstahl's documentaries¹⁴; or Céline's novels¹⁵. It is as wrong to argue that the immorality in these works of art is an adventitious characteristic as it is wrong to think that they would be made better if their moral flaws could be filtered out.

A second claim sustains that the kind of moral repulsion we feel when experiencing instances of "immoral art" is of a specific nature and one that is conceptually comprehensible only because it takes place within the framework of an experience that is already aesthetic to begin with. The anti-moralist argues that many of the emotions traditionally perceived as proper responses to artworks, such as being amused or intrigued, or challenged in a general way, are not permeable to moral considerations. Thus, in many cases, moral discussion about whether it is wrong to be delighted or amused with some given artwork has nothing to do with the nature of this delight. In fact, we will only reach the position to assess the aesthetic merits or demerits, properly speaking, of an artwork, if one gets access to it to start with and if we are already engaged in an aesthetic experience. Only then will further considerations such as whether it is proper or not to entertain such thoughts, may occur.

A third argument starts off by noticing that contemporary moralists tend to follow Hume's assumption according to which "I cannot, nor is it proper I should" enjoy a morally flawed artwork. But there is no reason to conflate the "I can" and the "I should not", i.e., the descriptive and the normative dimensions of aesthetic experience. The fact is that I can imaginatively follow and even be amused by morally flawed artworks even when I know or perhaps precisely because I know "I should not". If we are not willing or able to try to imagine what the works prescribes us then we are in no position to assess its aesthetic value just like if I don't get the joke, I am in no position to assess its humour. Moderate moralists seem to postulate the idea that the audience

¹⁴ Cf. Sontag, Susan, "Fascinating Fascism", in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982

¹⁵ Cf. Kristeva, Julia, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur : essai sur l'abjection*, Paris : Seuil, 1980.

constitutes an epistemic subject. This epistemic ideal is not only highly discriminative when it comes to passing judgments of taste but also infallibly correct in regards to moral judgment. On the one hand, it is highly improbable that this epistemic subject constitutes a fair sociological grasp of the “normal behavior” of common spectators. On the other hand, moral hypersensitivity also exists and can be a real problem in accessing artworks. Kendall Walton, for instance, believes that *Triumph des Willens* can only inspire aversion and despise.¹⁶ This artwork is morally inaccessible. Now, the price of opera tickets can be a real problem and make it inaccessible to a large fraction of the population. But we wouldn’t go as far as to argue that the price of the tickets constitute an aesthetic flaw.¹⁷ Similarly, the anti-moralist may concede that moral repugnance towards any given artwork can make it inaccessible to some, but cannot admit that such inaccessibility constitute an aesthetic flaw.

A fourth claim holds that our moral personality is built upon our capacity to imagine from a variety of viewpoints and art is particularly valuable because it increases the data from which we construct our imaginings, and this is particularly true of “immoral art. Moral particularists have demonstrated the power of imagination when it comes to building up a minimally consistent moral personality. True ethical understanding comes from the juxtaposition of several ethical perspectives and from the capacity to imagine based upon that variety of points of view, including those that seem to us morally distorted. Ethics determines what I ought and what I ought not to do and is based upon my ability to imagine the possible causes, scenarios and consequences of my actions. One of art’s potentials is to increase the data of my imaginings. In fact, eugenics in art is dangerous because it deprives us of one of the most powerful ways to

¹⁶ Cf. Walton, Kendall (1994), “Morals in fiction and fictional morality”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 68, 1984: 27-50, pp. 30-34.

¹⁷ Cf. Jacobson, 1997

get in touch with our own *dark side* and to bring it out into the imaginings that are the intuitive basis of our moral personality.

Contrary to Hume, “I can” imagine the dark or condemnable side of an artwork. It is only after that that I decide whether I should or not.

Against this claim, Matthew Kieran would argue that

“Imaginative understandings of life are always normative, even if this merely inheres in their negativity, and are always open to normative judgment. Thus a work that promotes a false imaginative understanding of others and the world is disvaluable as art. (...) Where a work promotes an immoral imaginative understanding, the artwork is disvaluable as art.”¹⁸

But the problem here is how we go from “a work that promotes a false imaginative understanding of others and the world is disvaluable as art” to “a work [that] promotes an immoral imaginative understanding, the artwork is disvaluable as art”. Surely the same could be said of completely optimistic and “pollyannic” artworks, i.e., artworks that are excessively optimistic, such as fairy tales or romantic comedies. Shouldn’t we then dismiss narratives with happy endings because they are also promoting a false imaginative understanding of the world? Shouldn’t we also consider whether morally undisturbed and righteous works are not intrinsically “disvaluable as art”?

A fifth and final claim believes that it is more often the case than not that we remain uncorrupted by a malicious character or a work’s repulsive ethics. The fact that we are capable of ethically “surviving” such works should give us a deeper sense of our moral commitments and of the soundness of their structure.

¹⁸ Kieran, Matthew, “Art, imagination and the cultivation of morals”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 54, n°4, Fall 1996, 337-351, pp.348-349.